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Chemicals increase in the Bound Brook

BY JARED KALTWASSER • STAFF WRITER • JULY 15, 2008

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SOUTH PLAINFIELD —Soil and sediment samples taken from the Bound Brook near a borough Superfund site in December 2007 had a higher average concentration of a cancer-causing chemical than samples taken at the same location a decade ago.

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The samples were taken in the vicinity of the Cornell-Dubilier Electronics Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Edison Wetlands Association, a local environmental group, had the results independently evaluated, and announced the results Monday.

"They actually found overall levels (of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs) that were significantly higher than they had been 10 years ago," said Robert Spiegel, executive director of the Edison Wetlands Association. "So much higher that they present an imminent threat to human health and the environment."

PCBs are nonflammable chemicals used in commercial and industrial processes. They were banned by the EPA in 1979, and according to the agency's Web site "have been demonstrated to cause cancer."

Beth Totman, an EPA spokeswoman, said the ""sampling did in fact reveal an increase, but it revealed an increase in average, but not the maximum concentration, of PCBs."

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But she declined to characterize how good or bad those results were.

The Cornell-Dubilier Electronics Superfund site is a 25-acre tract of land on the northeast corner of Hamilton Boulevard and Spicer Avenue named for the electronics manufacturer that occupied the site until 1961. The firm used PCBs in its manufacturing processes.

Spiegel said the recent PCB findings demonstrate complacency on the part of the EPA.

"This shows gross incompetence at the highest levels of the EPA," Spiegel said.

Spiegel said he has documentation that the EPA plans to still be addressing groundwater and sediment contamination in the Bound Brook through 2034.

Totman said she was not sure where Spiegel got the 2034 date, but admitted that the process will be lengthy.

"All I can say is that typically with groundwater contamination ... when you're dealing with that ... they are long-term clean-ups," she said referring to what Spiegel deemed as EPA complacency. ""You can't just go in overnight and get rid of contaminated water and just leave."

Authorities don't know for sure how the PCBs are getting into the soil, but one major source is believed to be discarded Cornell-Dubilier capacitors in the Bound Brook. In April of last year, Spiegel's group found two capacitors that tested positive for very high levels of PCBs.

Totman said the EPA monitors the Bound Brook's drainage areas on a weekly basis to "determine the presence and impact" of capacitors.

Spiegel said one of his major concerns is residents who fish in the ponds and lakes along the Bound Brook. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection currently has an advisory warning residents not to eat fish from the Bound Brook.

Totman said new signs will soon be put up in English and Spanish making residents aware of the danger. She also said new ecological testing would be done within the next couple of months. The most recent round of such testing was done a decade ago.

"This is a very involved cleanup that involved a lot of different issues and a lot of areas on this property," Totman said. "We've accomplished a lot so far. ... There was an industrial park with 18 contaminated buildings. We've demolished those buildings. We've taken off-site over 26,000 tons of building debris... There's a litany of things that we have already addressed."

Spiegel said he wants all capacitors removed, and access to the Bound Brook restricted by a fence.

Representatives from the EPA and the Edison Wetlands Association were slated to present their concerns to the borough council Monday night, but the presentations were postponed until Aug. 4.

Neither Mayor Charles Butrico nor Council President Robert Bengivenga Jr. had seen the new data when reached for comment Monday evening. But Butrico said the EPA had been ahead of schedule in its building demolition and he said the agency had appeared to "expedite" its work during the past two years.

Bengivenga said the site is a "sensitive area" that needs to be "a priority."

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